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David Murphy

Director, Environmental Partnership for Sustainable Development

Daniel Mourek

Greenway International Affairs Coordinator, Czech Environmental Partnership Foundation

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Central European Greenways – Designing International Corridors of Sustainable Development

Mr. David Murphy¹, Mr. Daniel Mourek², ¹*Director, Environmental Partnership for Sustainable Development*, ²*Greenway International Affairs Coordinator, Czech Environmental Partnership Foundation*

Introduction

This paper presents a practitioner's perspective on Greenways development in the New Member States of the European Union of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Greenways in this region came about as a result of and tool for the development of civil society in these countries after the collapse of communism. Greenways were introduced in Central Europe through direct cooperation with US based initiatives in the early and mid 1990s as part of a wider initiative to promote civic engagement in environmental improvement and decision making in an effort to re-establish a functioning and vibrant civic society. Greenways were viewed as a useful tool for promoting NGOs, environmental protection, environmentally responsible tourism and heritage protection in the region. Since these early initiatives, the Greenways movement has undergone many changes in vision, impact and purpose. Greenways now represent a flexible umbrella methodology for promoting sustainable development in many varied communities and geographic locations.

Background

The Environmental Partnership for Sustainable Development (EPSD) has been a key player in promoting, financing and developing Greenways initiative in Central Europe. The EPSD is a consortium of six independent foundations in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia dedicated to mobilizing and empowering people to improve their environment, their local communities and societies. Since their establishment in 1991, the Environmental Partnership foundations have invested approximately € 24 million in support of over 9,000 initiatives. As well as providing financial and technical support to local, grassroots organizations, EPSD foundations also implement directed national and regional programs designed to address local as well as regional and cross-border issues.

The greenways concept was introduced to Central and Eastern Europe through the Czech Republic. The first greenway initiative dates back to 1990, when a group of Czech-Americans led by Lu Chmielarz began to promote the idea of a Vienna-Prague Greenway. In 1998, the Czech Environmental Partnership Foundation (Nadace Partnerství) based in Brno took on the task of developing a countrywide greenways program, focused also on environmental and social improvement.

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The Central European Greenways Program (CEG), which began in 2000, is the flagship program of the EPSD running in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia with partner organizations in the neighboring countries of Austria, Belarus, Serbia and the Ukraine. The CEG program is an initiative to create an open network between civic, public sector, business, and governmental organizations that can provide complex and diverse support for efforts of local people to build and revitalize for public benefit trails and natural corridors called Greenways in the countries and regions of Central and Eastern Europe. The CEG network currently includes 8 long-distance Greenways and a dozen or more local trails – over 8000 km of „eco-trails“.

Vision of the CEG:

Make Greenways a well know and widely applied tool for sustainable community development in Central and Eastern Europe.

Mission of the CEG:

The mission of CEG is to create and promote trails and corridors for sustainable development called Greenways in the countries and regions of Central and Eastern Europe and to link them to wider European networks.

Definition of Greenways in CEE

Greenways are multifunctional trails for non-motorized users connecting communities, local initiatives, natural and cultural heritage sites, promoting a healthy environment and lifestyles. Greenways:

- are initiated, developed and managed by local communities;
- encourage sustainable development and provide a positive contribution to the local economy
- promote and enable low environmental impact lifestyles;
- provide a framework for community-based initiatives;
- promote nature conservation, cultural heritage preservation, sustainable tourism and mobility;
- integrate sustainable transport solutions and improve safety for users
- address needs of locals and visitors.

Goals and Objects

This paper will explore the evolution of the Greenways initiative in Central Europe from its early development as a tool for the promotion of civic society and encouraging civic participation to a series of on-going initiatives to promote Greenways as international corridors for sustainable development and as linear laboratories for various sustainability initiatives and cross sector partnerships. It will also provide examples of good practices of how Greenways can provide a framework for promoting innovative trends and practical solutions and initiatives for improving public space within communities, interpreting and protecting natural and

cultural heritage, providing opportunities for sustainable economic development and development of non-motorized transport. Greenways, when properly developed in cooperation with local communities are more than infrastructure investment and trails. Greenways in Central Europe now address a myriad of sustainability issues beyond tourism and cycling including promoting inter-modal transport and mobility, Placemaking and public spaces improvement, healthy lifestyles and even reduction of green house gas emissions. Greenways work best when developed from the perspective that the community is the expert and can best identify needs and that Greenways provide them with a network for innovative solutions. Cross sector partnerships involving the public, private and civic sector are also an essential ingredient in Greenways success.

Methods

The first Greenways in Central and Eastern Europe began in the early 1990s inspired by the experiences of the Hudson River Valley Greenway as well as other American Greenway initiatives. The first Greenway project, the Prague – Vienna Greenway, was initiated in 1994 as a joint project of the Czech Environmental Partnership Foundation (CEPF) and the Hudson River Valley Greenway. Development of the program included several study tours to the US and Western Europe to learn more about Greenways development.

Since that time this know-how has been shared with partner organizations across the CEE region and modified to meet local conditions and experience. There has been a slow and natural evolution in the vision and development of the Greenways concept in the CEE region as a result of both internal and external factors. In the late 1990s the program focused on the revitalization of natural corridors in rural and urban areas through the creation of a network of local initiatives to protect nature and heritage, promote recreation and tourism and help develop and preserve local identity. At this time funding came largely from foreign sources and the program functioned as a grant program. In the early years of the next decade emphasis was also given to developing better transportation, public planning and a framework for improved investment of local financial sources. In recent years, the focus of the program has expanded to promotion and support of innovative trends and practical solutions that in the area of non-motorized transport lead to the sustainable development of cities and municipalities and at the same time supports healthy lifestyles and encourages people to change their transport habits. Greenways initiatives are implemented in cooperation with the public and private sectors along defined Greenways corridors through both not-for-profit grant making and provision of services including tourism products and packages and trail development and awareness raising and educational activities.

Throughout this evolution the basic principle of partnership has remained a constant as the Greenways model has evolved to meet new challenges and provide a framework for achieving certain aspects of sustainable development. The partnership principle encourages peerage, where members are presumed equal, take equal ownership, share equal risk and derive equal benefit.

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There has been concerted effort within the CEG program to create structure and standards for Greenways development in the CEE region. These standards are in line with, but not identical to standards of the European Greenways Association and criteria established and promoted by major American Greenways organizations such as East Coast Greenways Alliance, Rails to Trails Conservancy and others. They have also been informed and influenced by our own 10 years of experience in promoting Greenways across the CEE region and working with partners in Eastern and Western Europe. In 2006 Greenways criteria were created and adopted, which define the minimum standards an initiative needs to meet to be considered and promoted as a Greenway. In the same year the CEG Declaration was adopted setting universal standards for Greenways in the region and a Memorandum of Understanding was adopted and signed by all program participants outlining their rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, Greenways manuals for practitioners have been published in Czech, Slovak, Polish, Bulgarian and Hungarian as practical guides for Greenways developers. These documents and guides are essential to help systematically promote Greenways methodology and initiatives.

Results

Expanding Network of Greenways in Central Europe

We currently support the on-going development of 7,935 kilometers of Greenways in Central Europe stretching from Bulgaria and Romania in the south to the Baltic

[illegible]

Country	km
Bulgaria	315
Czech	2445
Hungary	200
Poland	3778,8
Romania	534
Slovakia	663
Total	7935,8

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Expanding Network in CEE

A long term goal of the CEG is sharing of participatory methodology for Greenways development with neighboring countries, especially in Eastern Europe. Since 2004 the Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation has been helping to develop Greenways initiatives in Belarus and Ukraine and the Czech and Hungarian Foundations are helping develop Greenways in Serbia. The Czech Foundation has also been promoting Greenways in Bosnia – Herzegovina and Kosovo.

The Green Bicycle – East Carpathian Greenway is a cross border initiative in Poland, Slovakia and the Ukraine with a main backbone trail of 105 km and an additional 700 km of loop and joining trails based on the East Carpathian biosphere. The Greenways promotes cross border cooperation in Ecotourism coordinated by the Bieszczady Center for Active Tourism, a social enterprise selling ecotourism products certified with a Green Bicycle logo. There are three more Greenways planned for development in the Ukraine in the future. www.greenways.org.ua/history_eng.htm

In Belarus a series of study tours organized by the Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation since 2004 have resulted in the creation of four fledgling Greenways initiatives in Belarus. www.greenways.by/index.php?content&id=17&lang=en

Social Enterprises and Ecomuseums

The CEG network has served as an incubator for promoting social enterprises and Ecomuseums in Poland. According to the UK government a social enterprise is a "businesses with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximize profit for shareholders and owners." Ecomuseums originated in France, the concept being developed by George Henri Rivière and Hugues de Varine. It was Varine who coined the term 'ecomusée' in 1971 for use by the French Minister for the Environment, Robert Poujard. An ecomuseum is a community-based heritage project that supports sustainable development.

Through the initiative 'Social Economy on the Amber Trail' social enterprises were established by community-based non-governmental groups committed to conservation of natural and cultural values, operating in South Poland. These companies have involved unemployed young people from rural communities along the Greenways in identifying and building up tourist products based on local heritage resources. There are currently five social enterprises on the Polish Greenways that were initiated with the support of the Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation. One example of a social enterprise on the Greenways is the Carpathian Center of Active Tourism – Green Bicycle Social Enterprise. The Center offers eco-tourism products, a conference facility, training courses, promotes the local products brand "Hand-made in Bieszczady" and helps coordinate local and cross border marketing efforts. Another example of is 'Horyzonty ITD. in

Lanckorona approximately 30 km south of Krakow. The social enterprise Horyzonty ITD operates the 'On the Amber Trail' shop, which sells local heritage products from the Lanckorona region, including a variety of carved and painted images of angels, ceramics, linen products etc. The company operates also a café on Lanckorona's historic square and organizes visitor programs based on the Lanckorona Ecomuseum. Both enterprises reinvest their profits into the further development of the Greenways and their businesses. Ecomuseums on the Greenways

Certification Schemes for Improving Tourist Products and Promoting Cycle Culture

The Cyclist Welcome certification scheme in Czech Republic and Slovakia and the Bike Friendly and Clean Tourism Certification schemes in Poland promoted by the EPSD are examples of how Greenways can serve as a framework for systematically improving tourism services and promoting cycle culture. The Cyclist Welcome program defines quality standards comparable to existing certification schemes in other EU countries. Certified institutions receive a certificate valid for one year and are entered into an online database and are promoted through joint PR activities. Currently, 1150 institutions are certified in the Czech Republic and 70 in Slovakia where the program has just started. The main goal of the Bike Friendly project is to improve quality of tourist and other services for bicyclists and cycletourists and promote sustainable transport and sustainable tourism.

The Clean Tourism accreditation is primarily for small and medium-sized companies operating in the tourism sector and providing accommodation services (hotels, pensions, holiday homes, hostels etc.), food services (restaurants, bars, taverns etc.), agrotourism and other tourism-related services and aims to increase business performance in the tourism sector by helping companies improve their environmental performance and become actively engaged in the conservation of cultural and natural values. The Clean Tourism program responds to a growing interest among small companies operating in the tourism sector to learn about the latest trends in environmental performance and a motivation to meet European and international environmental performance standards.

Future Directions

We are working to link our Greenways initiatives to new initiatives and find new synergies to strengthen our projects. We are currently linking our program more closely with transportation issues such as Safe Routes to Schools and Mobility Plans. A mobility plan is a series of measures or a strategy designed to help an organization or locality reduce its transport impacts and influences the travel behavior of its employees, suppliers, visitors and/or customers. These measures are aimed at reducing or limiting individual automobile transport to the lowest possible level and increasing the level of environmentally responsible transport. They are created through an inclusive process of working with stakeholders to help them define their mobility needs and come up with sustainable mobility solutions.

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Furthermore, we are working to promote Greenways as a means for improving quality of and access to public space and to assist policy makers to re-evaluate the use and design of streets.

Discussion and Conclusions

Greenways are more than just trails. Greenways serve as tools for the promotion of sustainable lifestyles and a framework for the visioning of and implementation of sustainable development initiatives. The further development of Greenways and promotion of Greenways initiatives and methodology should go beyond design concerns but should include promote new concepts such as Placemaking, a inclusive process for the transformation of public spaces into vibrant public centers. As the Greenway brand and concept becomes increasingly well known and recognized it the responsibility of Greenways practitioners and academics to link, promote and place Greenways at the center of design and planning, smart growth and sustainable transport. Currently, our CEG network is engaged in designing and promoting Mobility Plan Manuals.

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